

**DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR****Fish and Wildlife Service****50 CFR Part 17**

RIN 1018-AI24

**Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; Final Designations or Nondesignations of Critical Habitat for 101 Plant Species From the Island of Oahu, HI****AGENCY:** Fish and Wildlife Service, Interior.**ACTION:** Final rule.

**SUMMARY:** We, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), designate critical habitat pursuant to the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (Act), for 99 of the 101 species known historically from the Hawaiian island of Oahu. A total of approximately 22,274 hectares (ha) (55,040 acres (ac)) of land on Oahu fall within the boundaries of the 303 critical habitat units designated for the 99 species. This critical habitat designation requires the Service to consult under section 7 of the Act with regard to actions carried out, funded, or authorized by a Federal agency. Section 4 of the Act requires us to consider economic and other relevant impacts when specifying any particular area as critical habitat. This rule also determines that designating critical habitat would not be prudent for two species (*Cyrtandra crenata* and *Pritchardia kaalae*). We solicited data and comments from the public on all aspects of the proposed rule, including data on economic and other impacts of the designation.

**DATES:** This rule becomes effective on July 17, 2003.

**ADDRESSES:** Comments and materials received, as well as supporting documentation, used in the preparation of this final rule will be available for public inspection, by appointment, during normal business hours at U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Pacific Islands Office, 300 Ala Moana Blvd., Room 3-122, PO Box 50088, Honolulu, HI 96850-0001.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** Paul Henson, Field Supervisor, Pacific Islands Office at the above address (telephone 808/541-3441; facsimile 808/541-3470).

**SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:****Disclaimer**

Designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection to species. In 30 years of implementing the ESA, the Service has found that the

designation of statutory critical habitat provides little additional protection to most listed species, while consuming significant amounts of scarce conservation resources. The present system for designating critical habitat has evolved since its original statutory prescription into a process that provides little real conservation benefit, is driven by litigation rather than biology, forces decisions to be made before complete scientific information is available, consumes enormous agency resources that would otherwise be applied to actions of much greater conservation benefit, and imposes huge social and economic costs. The Service believes that rational public policy demands serious attention to this issue in order to allow our limited resources to be applied to those actions that provide the greatest benefit to the species most in need of protection.

**Role of Critical Habitat in Actual Practice of Administering and Implementing the Act**

While attention to and protection of habitat is paramount to successful conservation actions, we have consistently found that, in most circumstances, the designation of critical habitat is of little additional value for most listed species, yet it consumes large amounts of conservation resources. [Sidle (1987. Env. Manage. 11(4):429-437) stated, "Because the ESA can protect species with and without critical habitat designation, critical habitat designation may be redundant to the other consultation requirements of section 7."] Currently, only 306 species or 25% of the 1,211 listed species in the U.S. under the jurisdiction of the Service have designated critical habitat. We address the habitat needs of all 1,211 listed species through conservation mechanisms such as listing, section 7 consultations, the Section 4 recovery planning process, the Section 9 protective prohibitions of unauthorized take, Section 6 funding to the States, and the Section 10 incidental take permit process. The Service believes that it is these measures that may make the difference between extinction and survival for many species.

**Procedural and Resource Difficulties in Designating Critical Habitat**

With a budget consistently inadequate to fund all of the petition review, listing, and critical habitat designation duties required of us by statute, we have in the past prioritized our efforts and focused our limited resources on adding species in need of protection to the lists of threatened or endangered species. We

have been inundated with lawsuits for our failure to designate critical habitat, and we face a growing number of lawsuits challenging critical habitat determinations once they are made. These lawsuits have subjected the Service to an ever-increasing series of court orders and court-approved settlement agreements, compliance with which now consumes nearly the entire listing program budget. This leaves the Service with little ability to prioritize its activities to direct scarce listing resources to the listing program actions with the most biologically urgent species conservation needs.

The consequence of the critical habitat litigation activity is that limited listing funds are used to defend active lawsuits, to respond to Notices of Intent (NOIs) to sue relative to critical habitat, and to comply with the growing number of adverse court orders. As a result, listing petition responses, the Service's own proposals to list critically imperiled species, and final listing determinations on existing proposals are significantly delayed. Litigation over critical habitat issues for species already listed and receiving the Act's full protection has precluded or delayed many listing actions nationwide.

The accelerated schedules of court ordered designations have left the Service with almost no ability to provide for adequate public participation or ensure a defect-free rulemaking process before making decisions on listing and critical habitat proposals due to the risks associated with noncompliance with judicially-imposed deadlines. This in turn fosters a second round of litigation in which those who fear adverse impacts from critical habitat designations challenge those designations. The cycle of litigation appears endless, is very expensive, and in the final analysis provides relatively little additional protection to listed species.

The costs resulting from the designation include legal costs, the cost of preparation and publication of the designation, the analysis of the economic effects and the cost of requesting and responding to public comment, and in some cases the costs of compliance with NEPA, all are part of the cost of critical habitat designation. None of these costs result in any benefit to the species that is not already afforded by the protections of the Act enumerated earlier, and they directly reduce the funds available for direct and tangible conservation actions.

**Background**

In the List of Endangered and Threatened Plants (50 CFR 17.12(h)),